Constructing a suburban identity: youth, femininity and modernity in late-Victorian Merseyside

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Abstract

Suburban growth was one of the main characteristics of late-nineteenth-century British towns, and a suburban lifestyle rapidly became the aspiration of a high proportion of urban dwellers. This paper explores the experience of one young woman growing up in a late-Victorian suburb, and assesses the ways in which she negotiated the structures of this emerging 'modern' environment, so as to construct her own identity and behaviour. Evidence is drawn from one very detailed diary covering the period 1884–1892, and attention is focused on three aspects of everyday life: public and social space; domestic routine; and friendships and relationships. The conventional view of middle-class suburban domesticity is challenged by evidence from this diary, which suggests that it was the public and social life of the suburb that was of particular importance to young women. While older married women's experiences were centred upon maintaining a respectable home, the provincial suburban environment offered to young single women considerable opportunities for independent mobility and action, which were restricted by relatively few familial constraints. The diarist did not fundamentally challenge the culture of middle-class suburbia, but instead was able to manipulate many social expectations to her own advantage. As a site of on-going development and malleable norms, late-nineteenth-century suburbia offered its young elite residents opportunities for a certain degree of social, cultural and spatial autonomy that was understood to be essential to the life of the nascent community.

Suburban growth was one of the main characteristics of late-nineteenth-century British towns and cities.[1] Although the precise definition of what constitutes a suburb can be debated, by the second half of the nineteenth century all urban areas were experiencing such growth.[2] A suburban lifestyle rapidly became the aspiration of a high proportion of urban dwellers and the suburb was recognised by contemporaries as a desirable spatial form. Those concerned with Victorian housing and health reforms were quick to extol the advantages of suburban life, which was perceived to provide space, fresh air and a healthy environment.[3]

The physical form of Victorian suburbia was highly varied, ranging from relatively high-density developments of terraced housing for skilled working-class and lower middle-class families, to low-density villa developments in semi-rural environments for the more affluent.[4] However, what united such diverse suburbs as a distinctive urban form was less their physical features than the cultural attributes that their residents were believed to share. Middle-class suburban lifestyles in particular were classically characterised as providing a combination of financial and psychological security, social respectability, and domestic privacy. Not only did suburban development allow physical separation from the

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[1] H.J. Dyos, *Victorian Suburb*, Leicester, 1973; A. Jackson, *Semi-Detached London: Suburban Development, Life and Transport, 1900–39*, London, 1973; D. Reeder, *Suburbanity and the Victorian City*, Leicester, 1980; F.M.L. Thompson (Ed), *The Rise of Suburbia*, Leicester, 1982; J. Whitehand, *The Making of the Urban Landscape*, Oxford, 1992, 125–171.

[2] J.H. Johnson (Ed), *Suburban Growth: Geographical Processes at the Edge of the Western City*, London, 1974; P. Knox, *Urban Social Geography: an Introduction*, Harlow, 1995, 208–212; J. Armstrong, From Shlillibeer to Buchanan: transport and the urban environment, in: M. Daunton (Ed), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain. Volume III, 1840–1950*, Cambridge, 2000, 229–257; R. Webster (Ed), *Expanding Suburbia: Reviewing Suburban Narratives*, New York, 2000.

[3] J. Burnett, *A Social History of Housing, 1815–1970*, London, 1978; A. Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain*, London, 1983; R. Rodger, *Housing in Urban Britain, 1780–1914*, Basingstoke, 1989.

[4] M. Simpson and T. Lloyd, *Middle-class Housing in Britain*, Newton Abbott, 1977; Burnett, *A Social History* (note 3).

urban poor, but also it provided a set of cultural signifiers that enabled the establishment of a middle-class identity.[5] The quasi-proper name 'Suburbia' was coined to define such spaces in the 1890s, and this distinctively late-Victorian social milieu allowed the creation of a stable home and family life, the consumption of the expanding material culture of respectability, and the pursuit of everyday activities in the company of others with a similar background and mindset.[6]

Although the ambivalent literary representations of suburbia have been studied, the ways in which suburban values and experiences were understood by their inhabitants have been rarely considered.[7] 'The paucity of sources' has left middle-class experiences of suburban life as 'missing voices' in the existing historiography.[8] This paper adopts the prism of one young woman's diary to explore the ways in which she used, interpreted and appropriated a late-nineteenth-century provincial suburb so as to construct her own lifestyle and identity.

It has been argued that the suburb and the cult of domesticity, which it fostered, was a space of particular importance for women and one in which men were increasingly uncomfortable.[9] Studies have focused on the responsibilities of married women for whom a suburban lifestyle placed expectations of high standards of domestic cleanliness, 'scientific' child-rearing and a public display of respectability.[10] The experiences of younger, single suburban women were potentially quite different, but have rarely been considered.

This absence is surprising given that the figure of the 'New Woman' emerged concurrently with the ideal of the suburb. The 'New Woman' was primarily a literary creation who flouted conventions, asserted her independence, demanded educational, sexual and occupational equality and adopted youthful, irreverent and shocking codes of behaviour. Both the image of the suburb and the 'New Woman' were interpreted as signs of fin-de-siècle modernity and were widely satirised. However, while mockery of the aspiring conformist suburbanite was understood to have light-hearted and comic potential, the 'New Woman' was interpreted by many as a profound political and social threat.[11] Likewise, the apparent safety of the space of the suburb contrasted with anxieties that were expressed about women's increasing cultural

prominence as shoppers, journalists and professional workers in London.[12] It is therefore revealing to explore the interaction between these two images, so as to consider both the gendering of the suburb and the suburbanising of young women.

It was in the final decades of the nineteenth century that many have suggested that 'adolescence' began to be understood as a universally experienced and distinct life-cycle stage, which required specialised treatment. It has been suggested that the adoption of secondary, especially boarding, school education for the sons and latterly the daughters of the middle class was critical in establishing a separate age-defined period between childhood and adulthood.[13] The rising mean age of marriage combined with a national concern about the perceived 'fitness' of the young further contributed to the construction of independent cultures of boyhood and girlhood for which novels, periodicals, advice manuals, sporting associations and voluntary youth groups increasingly also catered.[14]

While historians have demonstrated the importance of shifting psychological, physiological and pedagogical understandings of youth, there is an extensive contemporary geographical literature that maintains the centrality of young people in forming conceptions of childhood and youth. Instead of merely being subject to changing constructions of themselves by adults, these studies argue for the importance of identifying child agency and of listening to children's voices.[15] For the late-nineteenth-century generational cultures have been identified primarily through gang cultures whose agency was demonstrated through rebellions led by working-class lads.[16] This article suggests that late-Victorian suburban society also produced constraints to which middle-class young women responded. However, the relatively insubstantial and malleable structures of nascent suburbia in the 1880s and 1890s meant that the younger generation was able to construct their own versions of suburban identity that were formative in shaping, rather than rejecting, late-Victorian middle-class society.

This paper explores these themes through the analysis of the writings of one young woman, Elizabeth Lee, who kept a daily diary from the age of sixteen in 1884 until 1892. Elizabeth was the eldest child and only daughter of a draper and gentleman's outfitter. Throughout the period of the diary she was unmarried and living in

[5] G. Crossick (Ed), *The Lower Middle Class in Britain*, London, 1977; R. Silverstone (Ed), *Visions of Suburbia*, London, 1997; Webster (Ed) *Expanding Suburbia* (note 2); M. Daunton and M. Hilton (Eds), *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America*, Oxford, 2001; J. Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity*, Oxford, 2004.

[6] *Oxford English Dictionary*.

[7] K. Flint, Fictional Suburbia, *Literature and History* 8 (1982) 67–81; A. Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*, London, 1991; A.J. Hammerton, The perils of Mrs Pooter: satire, modernity and motherhood in the lower middle class in England, 1870–1920, *Women's History Review* 8 (1999) 261–276; Webster, *Expanding Suburbia* (note 2).

[8] A.J. Hammerton, Pooterism or partnership? Marriage and masculine identity in the lower middle class, 1870–1920, *The Journal of British Studies* 38 (1999) 291–321; L. Hapgood, 'The new suburbanites' and contested class identities in the London suburbs, 1880–1900, in: Webster (Ed), *Expanding Suburbia* (note 2), 31–49; C. French, Who lived in Suburbia? Surbiton in the second half of the 19th century, *Family and Community History* 10 (2007) 93–109.

[9] Hammerton, Pooterism or partnership? (note 8); G. Cunningham, The rise of Suburbia: suburban fictions at the Victorian fin de siècle, in: Webster (Ed), *Expanding Suburbia* (note 2), 51–70; M. Pugh, The domestication of the male? Recent research on nineteenth- and twentieth-century British masculinity, *The Historical Journal* 45 (2002) 637–652.

[10] Light, *Forever England* (note 7); Hammerton, The Perils of Mrs Pooter (note 7); Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb* (note 5).

[11] J. Gardiner (Ed), *The New Woman*, London, 1993; S. Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin De Siècle*, Manchester, 1997; A. Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism*, Basingstoke, 2000.

[12] J. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*, London, 1992; D.M. Copelman, *London's Women Teachers: Gender, Class and Feminism, 1870–1930*, London, 1996; E. Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End*, Princeton, 2000; S. Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London*, Princeton, 2004.

[13] C. Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late-Victorian and Edwardian England*, London, 1981; J. Springhall, *Coming of Age: Adolescence in Britain, 1860–1960*, Dublin, 1986; F. Hunt (Ed), *Lessons for Life: the Schooling of Girls and Women, 1850–1950*, Oxford, 1987.

[14] S. Mitchell, *The New Girl: Girls' Culture in England, 1880–1915*, New York, 1995; T.M. Proctor, (Uni)forming youth: girl guides and boy scouts in Britain, 1908–39, *History Workshop Journal* 45 (1998) 103–34; J. Holt, *Public School Literature, Civic Education and the Politics of Male Adolescence*, Aldershot, 2008.

[15] T. Skelton and G. Valentine (Eds), *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*, London, 1998; S. Holloway and G. Valentine (Eds), *Children's Geographies: Playing, Living, Learning*, London, 2000; S. Aitken, *Geographies of Young People: the Morally Contested Spaces of Identity*, New York, 2001; S. Holloway and G. Valentine, *Cyberkids: Children in the Information Age*, London, 2003.

[16] S. Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels? An Oral History of Working-Class Childhood and Youth, 1889–1939*, London, 1981; H. Hendrick, *Images of Youth: Age, Class and the Male Youth Problem 1880–1920*, Oxford, 1990; A. Davies, *The Gangs of Manchester: the Story of the Scuttlers, Britain's First Youth Cult*, Preston, 2008.